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MTRS
MASSACHUSETTS TEACHERS'
RETIREMENT SYSTEM

MTRS Employer Bulletin

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We've scheduled our annual summer Employer Training seminars—please come!

As we announced in a broadcast e-mail to you earlier this month, we've scheduled our annual summer series of training programs for school district administrators, and we hope that you will join us!

Who should attend?

Business managers, payroll officers, town treasurers and accountants and anyone else involved in the administration of the teachers' retirement system at the school district level. In addition to the primary goal of informing our school districts of new developments, we also consider these meetings opportunities to meet new administrators and to strengthen our relationship with people we depend on and work with throughout the year.

What you will learn...

This year's agenda includes the following timely topics:

- **MTRS information resources for school business officials:** Learn whom to

contact for support, as well as what's planned for the employer area of our website. If you have any comments, requests or suggestions, please tell us!

- **BERT, our new deduction report processing tool for employers:** See how our Basic Employer Reporting Tool works, and understand its benefits.
- **Regular compensation issues:** Be aware of the recent extended longevity buy out ("ELBO") rules, and review what qualifies as "regular compensation"—and what doesn't.
- **Termination retirement and benefit forfeiture:** Walk through a case study to understand the process and special issues involved in these often complex and sensitive situations.

The updated 2007 program is very important for both the MTRS and our school districts and we hope that your district will be represented. We look forward to seeing you there!

We recommend that at least one representative from each district attend.

To register, simply go to mass.gov/mtrs/3register/3employpro.htm.

All programs run from 9 a.m. to noon, with the doors opening at 8:30 a.m.

- ☐ **CAMBRIDGE:** MTRS Cambridge office, Presentation Room, first floor
 - ☐ TUESDAY, JULY 31
 - ☐ WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 8
 - ☐ THURSDAY, AUGUST 16
- ☐ **WORCESTER:** WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 1, Crowne Plaza Worcester
- ☐ **SPRINGFIELD:** THURSDAY, AUGUST 2, Springfield Marriott
- ☐ **BRIDGEWATER:** TUESDAY, AUGUST 7, Bridgewater State College, Moakley Center
- ☐ **DEVENS:** THURSDAY, AUGUST 9, Devens Common Center
- ☐ **WAKEFIELD:** TUESDAY, AUGUST 14, Sheraton Colonial Hotel and Golf Club
- ☐ **HYANNIS:** FRIDAY, AUGUST 17, Sheraton Four Points Hyannis

Free, easy to use and compliant with our reporting regulations—

BERT, our new employer reporting tool, is available online!

Meet BERT

Released in April 2007, our Basic Electronic Reporting Tool (BERT) replaces AutoReport, an application produced for the MTRS in 1998. Developed by the MTRS's Employer Services and Information Technology teams, BERT is designed to provide all school districts with an easy-to-use retirement deduction reporting tool that requires less data entry, features user-friendly input screens and that is fully compliant with our employer reporting requirements (807 CMR 5.00).

Using BERT, you—school district payroll officials—can now:

- **create** your monthly deduction report database right on your desktop computer,
- **create, change and delete** employees' records as needed, and then
- **export** your monthly deduction report to your local hard drive, diskette, CD and/or other media.

You will still need to send us your file on diskette or CD, along with your payment check and *MTRS Deduction Submittal Sheet*. While BERT provides an up-to-date reporting tool, we are still not able to accept your deduction reports electronically—although we are working toward that goal.

Which districts can (or should) use BERT

BERT is designed specifically for districts that:

- currently use MTRS AutoReport and need a primary reporting tool,

Important note to MTRS AutoReport users:
You **MUST** switch to BERT!

AutoReport is out of date and is **no longer supported** by the MTRS. Plus, we are sure that you will find that BERT is much easier to use!

- need a temporary software solution when their primary system fails or is not available (for example, during a software upgrade),
- need an application that will enable them to submit data corrections, and
- are newly created.

However, all districts are welcome to use BERT—either monthly, or simply on an as-needed basis!

System requirements

BERT is a Microsoft Access application. In order to run BERT, you will need to have Microsoft Access 2000, Access 2003 or Access 2007 installed on your computer. [Note to Mac users: We are sorry, but because Access is not



If your current payroll deduction reporting tool or vendor meets your requirements, you do not “need” to use BERT—but all districts are welcome to use it, either monthly or simply on an as-needed basis.

available in a Mac-compatible version, you will not be able to use BERT unless you have both the PC-version of Access and Virtual PC installed on your Mac.]

Frequently asked questions—and answers

- Once I download BERT, will I need to download it every time I want to use it?
No—BERT is a Microsoft Access application; once you download it to your computer, you use it just as you would any other program. In the event that the MTRS releases a new version, we will notify payroll administrators via broadcast e-mail (so please be sure to notify us of any change in your e-mail address by contacting our Employer Services unit).
- Can I submit my deduction reports online now?
No—while BERT provides an easy-to-use tool to prepare your reports, it does not allow you to submit them electronically. You still need to send us your reports on diskette or CD, along with your *MTRS Deduction Submittal Sheet*.

Whom do I contact for support?

Please call our Employer Services unit in Cambridge, at 617-679-6895, or e-mail us at bertsupport@trb.state.ma.us. ■

Unsettled or just-settled contracts? Please tell us!

When your district settles a contract, please be sure to:

- 1) **report all retroactive earnings** in either the retroactive earning field, or by using retroactive records in your monthly deduction report;
- 2) **take deductions for retirees and terminated employees** and include their records in the monthly report; and,
- 3) **provide the MTRS with a list of any employees who retired under the unsettled contract**, their dates of retirement and adjusted salary information. As you know, when your employees retire under an unsettled contract, we need to know when the contract is settled, and its terms, so that we may adjust—**increase**—their retirement benefits. Please submit your information to the Member Services department in

either our Springfield or Cambridge office (if Cambridge, ATTN: Contract Settlement). Benefit adjustments are generally processed on a first-come, first-served basis, so please send us your information as soon as possible. ■

*If you **haven't** already sent us electronic or paper copies of your collective bargaining agreements, please send them*

If you have already sent us your contracts, thank you! If you haven't yet, please e-mail your contracts to us at empsup@trb.state.ma.us at your first opportunity. If your district is among those where contracts are currently unsettled and negotiations are in progress, simply notify us by e-mail. ■



PAYROLL REPORTING FACT

The timeliness—or delay—in the submission of your monthly payroll deduction reports directly affects our ability to process employees' refunds and retirement benefits. If your reports are late, we cannot pay our members.

In the years since 1996, when the MTRS implemented a comprehensive report format, most school districts have become proficient at producing accurate and timely data—and we appreciate your cooperation. We know that there are a variety of problems that can hinder the process and delay the submission and processing of reports, and we understand these situations. Please know that we are familiar with most of these issues and are often able to suggest solutions—don't hesitate to call your Employer Services representative, as we're here to help.

If your district has fallen behind and we seem especially concerned right now, it is because these seasonal demands involve firm deadlines. It is for that reason we ask you to be particularly responsive when we must request replacement or corrected data. You are supplying the data that enables your retiring members to receive that first pension check as early as possible. We are grateful for the work you do for us and our members throughout the year, and especially for your extra efforts during our busiest time.

Enrollment season is around the corner—

Be sure that new enrollees provide complete information

The new MTRS online enrollment application is being employed enthusiastically by both members and school district business administrators (mass.gov/mtrs > Employers > Employer forms > MTRS Enrollment Registration form). Since its introduction in September 2006, school districts have registered more than 9,000 members who were either new to our system or who needed to complete the process to “fill in the blanks” in their membership records. And, importantly, we are seeing the benefits of this improved processing method: better account information, more complete and accurate eligibility review, and earlier rate error detection.

Save yourself time and aggravation: Check an enrollee's data against yours

The enrollment process saves *us* time by allowing us to detect problems in members' accounts soon after they enroll—when they are relatively easy to correct. The process can also save *you* time and aggravation.

When your new hire returns her enrollment confirmation sheet, carefully compare the information provided by the member to what you entered when you registered the employee online. The two inputs should match closely; if they do not, please find out why. Be especially aware of the new hire's responsibility to report all prior public service employment in Massachusetts. This has a direct effect on the employee's deduction rate and RetirementPlus status. If you are enrolling a teacher whom you know had previously been employed as a teacher's aide or assistant teacher, check to make sure that service is indicated on the form. It is also a good idea to compare the work history listed on the résumé to that listed on the enrollment form. ■

FROM THE EMPSUP@TRB.STATE.MA.US INBOX —

Q: One of our veteran teachers is terminally ill.
What should he consider as far as whether or not he should apply for retirement while he is still employed?

As we all know, these are difficult cases, with unique personal circumstances for everyone involved. Here are just some of the issues the member should consider in order to maximize his benefits both now and for his family in the event of his death.

Some questions to ask

1) Does the member's MTRS beneficiary designation accurately reflect his wishes?

The member should contact us to confirm his beneficiary designation information on record with us—both the **type** of designation (lump-sum or member-survivor) and the **person(s) named**. If necessary, he should update his designation by submitting a new *Beneficiary designation—Active member* form, available for downloading from our website.

2) Is the member under age 55?

If yes, and he dies while still actively employed and has designated a member-survivor beneficiary, the monthly benefit paid to the member's survivor will be higher than what the member would have received in a monthly retirement benefit, if he had chosen to retire prior to his death. (When a member under age 55 dies while in active service, his member-survivor benefit is calculated as if he was age 55 on the date of his death, and his beneficiary's age is also increased by the same number of years as applied to the member's age. This results in a higher benefit to the *survivor* than what would have been calculated as the *retirement* benefit to the member.)

3) Does the member have any dependent children (under age 18, or 22 if a full-time student)?

If yes, and he dies while still actively employed, in addition to the monthly benefit paid to his member-

survivor beneficiary, the MTRS will pay survivor benefits of \$120 per month for the first dependent child, and \$90 per month for each additional dependent child.

4) Is the member seeking to provide a monthly benefit to his member-survivor beneficiary?

If yes, and he dies while still actively employed, the amount of the member-survivor benefit will be equal to the *full* amount that the member would have received as a retirement benefit under Option C; if the member died after retiring, the survivor would receive just *two-thirds* of the member's retirement benefit amount.

NOTE: These cases are often complex and involve many additional considerations (such as availability of sick leave, health insurance and disability benefits) as well as limitations and restrictions. If you find yourself in the position of acting as the contact person for the family of a terminally ill member regarding retirement issues, please call us for assistance, as we are here to help with these sensitive cases in any way possible.

Do you have a question about enrolling a member, withholding retirement contributions, establishing contribution rates or submitting payroll deductions?

If so, please submit it to us at empsup@trb.state.ma.us and we'll reply via e-mail. You'll also be helping your colleagues, as we'll publish Q&A that we think might be useful to others in a future Employer Bulletin!